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ABSTRACT

This report presents information on personal student victimization from the 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES), based on the responses of 6,504 students in grades 6 through 12 who were surveyed. The data indicate that unsafe conditions at school are a reality for most students in the United States. The report found that 56 percent of the respondents had personally witnessed some type of crime or victimization at school, including bullying, physical attack, or robbery, and that 71 percent reported that such incidents happened at their schools. Nearly 25 percent of students reported worrying about becoming victims of crime or threats at school, while 12 percent reported being victimized at school. More elementary, middle, and junior high school students reported being worried about becoming victims at school than did senior high school students. The report also found that students at private schools were less likely to witness, worry about, or experience victimization at school, and that girls were less likely than boys to be victimized. A discussion of survey methodology and data reliability is included. (MDM)

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ED 388 439

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Statistics in Brief **October 1995**

Student Victimization at School

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Most Americans would agree that all schools should provide an environment that is safe for students. Unfortunately, this ideal presents a serious challenge in a society where crime against students and teachers at schools, as well as other threats to security and a sense of well being, are reported with alarming frequency. The National Crime Victimization Survey data show that an estimated 2.7 million violent crimes take place annually either at school or near schools.[1] About one in four public school teachers rated physical conflicts among students as being a serious or moderately serious problem in their schools.[2] The possibility that students may experience or be threatened by robbery and physical assault while at school has sparked national concern. So widespread is the image of students as victims that one of the National Education Goals proposes that, "By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning." Identifying the incidence of violence in schools and the extent of fear of violence at school among students is necessary in order to measure progress toward reaching that goal.

This report presents information on personal student victimization from a national survey of 6th- through 12th-grade students conducted in the spring of 1993. The data reported are from the 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES:93) conducted by Westat for the National Center for Education Statistics. This report is based upon the responses of the 6,504 students in grades 6 through 12 who were surveyed.[3] Weights were applied to make the survey estimates applicable to the entire population of children in grades 6 through 12.[4]

The estimates provided here reflect only incidents that occurred at school, including those that may have happened at school-related events, such as sports activities, that are held during the school day, or on the way to or from school. Studies such as the National Crime Victimization Survey have typically defined "victimization" as direct personal experience of threats or harm. This report expands the definition of victimization to include knowledge or witness of crime or incidents of bullying at school. The American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth asserts, for example, that "even youth who are not direct victims of violence may be victimized by the chronic presence of violence in their communities."[5] Certainly the same would be applicable to schools. Students who have reason to fear for their safety at school would encounter a very different learning environment than would students who have no reason to worry about becoming victims of crime or threats at school.

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The NHES:93 results suggest that unsafe conditions at school are a reality for most U.S. students (table 1). Half of 6th- through 12th-grade students personally witnessed some type of crime or victimization at school, and about one out of eight students reported being directly victimized at school. The findings also suggest that students at some schools may be more vulnerable than students at other schools.

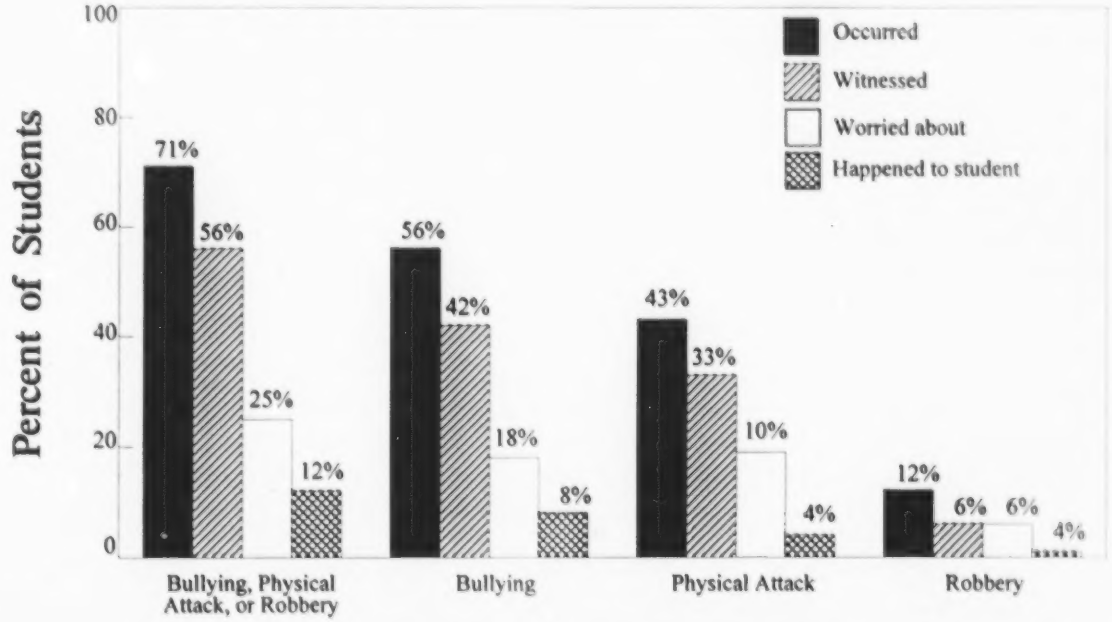
Student Reports of Crime and Threats at School

Students were asked to report incidents of crime or threats of crime at their schools or on the way to or from school since the beginning of the 1992–93 school year. Data were collected from January through April 1993. Crime or threats may be manifested in a variety of ways. For this report, three types of incidents examined in the NHES:93 were considered, specifically, bullying (repeated threat of harm), any kind of physical attack, and robbery (taking something directly by force or threat of force). Students were asked first whether they knew of each type of incident having happened at their school. Those who said they had knowledge of unsafe incidents at school that year were also asked whether they had seen any incidents like that happen to someone else, whether they worried that kind of thing might happen to them, and whether it had, in fact, ever happened to them during that school year. Students were not asked to report whether they had experienced multiple victimizations of the same type, for example, whether they had been robbed more than once.

Robbery and physical attack were measured because they are occurrences commonly reported in the media. "Physical attack" included students getting into fights at school as well as other types of physical assault. Preliminary research conducted during the design phase of the NHES:93 suggested that fist fights at school are treated as serious infractions by school administrators, and students themselves view them as dangerous. Students are physically and emotionally victimized by fights as well as by being attacked. Bullying also jeopardizes the well-being of students.[6] It, too, contributes to an adverse school environment.

A large majority of students in the 6th through 12th grades, 71 percent, reported having knowledge of bullying, physical attack, or robbery at their schools during the current school year (figure 1 and table 1). The greatest percentage of students (56 percent) reported that bullying had occurred in their schools, followed

Figure 1.—Sixth- through twelfth-graders' reports of the occurrence, witnessing, worry about, or victimization, by selected incidents: 1993



*Students who reported more than one type of incident are included in the overall victimization percentages only one time.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1993

by physical attack (43 percent), and robbery (12 percent). At least one incident of bullying, physical attack, or robbery was witnessed by about half of all students (56 percent). Given these reports, fear of threats or crime at school is rather low: 25 percent of students reported being worried about being victimized at school. Approximately one-third of 6th- through 12th-grade students reported having witnessed a physical attack at school, and 1 out of 10 students worried about being attacked at school.

Twelve percent of students, or about one out of eight, reported having been directly and personally victimized at school during the current school year. Physical attack, a major source of public concern, was reported by a total of 4 percent of students, while victimization by bullying was reported by 8 percent (figure 1 and table 2). Robbery, or having things taken by force or threat of force, was uncommon, with only about 1 percent of students reporting that they were victimized in this manner.

Reports of Crime and Threats, by School and Student Characteristics

Differences by school grade level. The prevalence of events relating to student victimization varied significantly according to whether the school attended was an elementary school, a middle or junior high school, or a senior high school. It is worth noting that only 11 percent of students in grades 6 through 12 attended an elementary school. According to the definitions of school grade level used in this report, elementary and middle or junior high school students would, on average, be younger than high school students.[7] Thus, age of student may be a confounding factor in the findings about school grade level.

Attending school in an environment where disturbing events are known to happen and have been witnessed may have an impact upon students' sense of security, potentially contributing to less effective learning. According to students, incidents of bullying, physical attack, or robbery occurred in schools at all grade levels, and a majority of students witnessed at least one of these incidents (table 1). Witnessing these types of incidents did not vary significantly for students at schools of different grade levels. Nevertheless, students' worry about victimization decreased after middle or junior high school:

- More elementary (29 percent) and middle and junior high school students (34 percent) said they worried about becoming victims at school than did senior high school students (20 percent).

Perhaps the most traumatizing exposure to danger at school is through personal experience. Although more students knew about or had seen an incident than had been personally a victim, many students were also the direct targets of crime and threats at school, and this is more likely to be the case for middle or junior high school students than for high school students.

- Seventeen percent of middle or junior high school students reported being personally victimized, compared to 8 percent of senior high school students (table 1).

Bullying appears to take place more in middle or junior high schools than in high schools, and the difference between the percentages of students in those schools reporting victimization is largely attributable to that type of incident:

- Twelve percent of middle or junior high school students reported being bullied, double the percentage of senior high school students (table 2).

Differences between public and private schools. The type of school that a youth attended was also associated with the likelihood of exposure to crime or threats. Eighty-one percent of 6th- through 12th-grade students attended public schools to which they were assigned, 11 percent attended public schools chosen by the family, and 8 percent attended private schools. In general, students in public schools had more knowledge of and experience with crime and threats than children in private schools:

- Seventy-three percent of children in assigned public schools and 71 percent in public schools of choice reported knowledge of an occurrence* of either bullying, physical attack, or robbery, compared to 45 percent of private school students (table 1).
- Public school students in both assigned and chosen schools were more likely to witness crime or threats personally at school and to worry about becoming a victim than were private school students.

However, only students in assigned public schools were significantly more likely than students in private schools to report that they had been directly victimized:

- Twelve percent of students in assigned public schools versus 7 percent of students in private schools said they had personally experienced

crime or threats in their school during the current school year (table 1).

Differences did exist between students attending private school versus those attending either assigned or chosen public schools in their reports of personal victimization by physical attack.

- A greater percentage of public school students, 4 percent in both assigned and chosen public schools, reported being physically attacked at school than did private school students, 1 percent of whom reported such attacks (table 2).

Differences by school size. Students at larger schools are more likely than students at the smallest schools to be exposed to bullying, physical attack, or robbery. A greater percentage of students at schools containing 600 or more students than those attending schools of fewer than 300 students reported knowledge of crime or threats at school and witnessing crime. However,

- There was no difference in worry about crime or in actual victimization for students at larger schools.

Differences by school racial composition and student's race/ethnicity. Exposure to crime and threats at school crosses racial and ethnic boundaries. Overall, students' perceptions of the safety of their schools varied little by the student's race or ethnicity and the school racial composition. The majority of both black and white students in schools with varying racial compositions reported having heard about and having seen crime or threats (table 1):

- Worry and victimization also did not differ by student's race or school racial composition.

Differences by sex. Crime and threats at school affect both boys and girls. Seventy-one percent of male and 70 percent of female students reported knowing about bullying, physical attack, or robbery at school; witnessing these events and worrying about them also did not differ by the sex of the student (table 1). Male and female students did differ, however, when it came to having been personally victimized at school:

- Boys were more likely to be victimized than were girls (14 versus 9 percent, respectively).

Summary

Substantial percentages of U.S. students in the 6th through 12th grades face crime or threats at school or on the way to or from school. Seventy-one percent of students reported that bullying, physical attack, or robbery had happened at their schools; about one-quarter of students said that they worry about becoming victims of crime or threats at school, and about one student in eight was victimized at school. Exposure to dangerous or threatening behavior at school was most common for students attending middle or junior high schools, students at public schools, and students at larger schools.

Students exposed to crime or threats and worried about becoming victims at school are experiencing a learning environment that is seriously deficient. America needs to ensure that schools are communities of teachers and learners, where learning can take place in a secure environment.

Survey Methodology and Data Reliability

The 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES:93) is a telephone survey conducted by Westat for the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Data collection took place from January through April of 1993. The sample is nationally representative of all civilian, noninstitutionalized persons in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. This sample was selected using random digit dialing (RDD) methods, and the data were collected using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology.

The School Safety and Discipline (SS&D) component of the NHES:93, which is the basis of this report, included a sample of students in grades 3 through 12. Two instruments were used to collect data on the school experiences of these students. A household Screener, administered to an adult member of the household, was used to determine whether any children of the appropriate ages lived in the household, to collect information on each household member, and to identify the appropriate parent/guardian respondent. If one or two eligible children resided in the household, interviews were conducted about each child. If more than two eligible children resided in the household, two children were randomly sampled as interview subjects. For households with children who were sampled for the survey, SS&D interviews were conducted with the parent/guardian most knowledgeable about the care and education of each child. If an eligible youth resided in a household in which no adult was acting in a caretaking capacity for him or her, then that "emancipated" youth responded to the interview. A sample of youth in grades 6 through 12 was also interviewed following the completion of the parent interview about the child. This report was based on the responses of the students in grades 6 through 12.

Response Rates

For the NHES:93 survey, Screeners were completed with 63,844 households, of which 12,829 contained at least one child sampled for the SS&D component. The response rate for the Screener was 82 percent. The completion rate for the SS&D interview with parents of 6th- through 12th-grade students, or the percentage of interviews conducted with parents for sampled children in that grade range, was 90 percent, and the completion rate for the youth in grades 6 through 12 who were sampled was 83 percent. Thus, the overall response rate for the SS&D interview with parents of students in grades 6 through 12 was 74 percent (the product of the Screener response rate and the SS&D completion rate). For youth, the overall response rate was 68 percent. For the NHES:93, item nonresponse (the failure to complete some items in an otherwise completed interview) was very low. The item nonresponse rates for variables in this report are generally less than 2 percent for parents and 1 percent for youth. Items with missing data were imputed using a hot-deck procedure. As a result, no missing values remain.

Data Reliability

Estimates produced using data from the NHES:93 are subject to two types of error, sampling and nonsampling errors. Nonsampling errors are errors made in the collection and processing of data. Sampling errors occur because the data are collected from a sample rather than a census of the population.

Nonsampling errors. Nonsampling error is the term used to describe variations in the estimates that may be caused by population coverage limitations and data collection, processing, and reporting procedures. The sources of nonsampling errors are typically problems like unit and item nonresponse, the differences in respondents' interpretations of the meaning of the questions, response differences related to the particular time the survey was conducted, and mistakes in data preparation.

In general, it is difficult to identify and estimate either the amount of nonsampling error or the bias caused by this error. In the NHES:93 survey, efforts were made to prevent such errors from occurring and to compensate for them where possible. For instance, during the survey design phase, focus groups and cognitive laboratory interviews were conducted for the purpose of assessing respondent knowledge of the topics, comprehension of questions and terms, and the sensitivity of items. The design phase also entailed over 500 staff hours of CATI instrument testing and a pretest in which over 275 interviews were conducted.

An important nonsampling error for a telephone survey is the failure to include persons who do not live in households with telephones. About 92 percent of all students in grades 3 through 12 live in households with telephones. Estimation procedures were used to help reduce the bias in the estimates associated with children who do not live in telephone households.[8]

Sampling errors. The sample of telephone households selected for the NHES:93 is just one of many possible samples that could have been selected. Therefore, estimates produced from the NHES:93 sample may differ from estimates that would have been produced from other samples. This type of variability is called sampling error because it arises from using a sample of household with telephones, rather than all households with telephones.

The standard error is a measure of the variability due to sampling when estimating a statistic; standard errors for estimates presented in this report were computed using a jackknife replication method. Standard errors can be used as a measure of the precision expected from a particular sample. The probability that a complete census count would differ from the sample estimate by less than one standard error is about 68 percent. The chance that the difference would be less than 1.65 standard errors is about 90 percent; and that the difference would be less than 1.96 standard errors, about 95 percent.

Standard errors for all of the estimates are presented in the tables. These standard errors can be used to produce confidence intervals. For example, an estimated 12 percent of students reported that they had been victimized at school. This figure has an estimated standard error of .7. Therefore, the estimated 95 percent confidence interval for this statistic is approximately 10.6 to 13.4 percent.

Statistical tests. The tests of significance used in this analysis are based on Student's *t* statistics. As the number of comparisons at the same significance level increases, it becomes more likely that at least one of the estimated differences will be significant merely by chance, that is, it will be erroneously identified as different from zero. Even when there is no statistical difference between the means or percentages being compared, there is a 5 percent chance of getting a significant *t* value of 1.96 from sampling error alone. As the number of comparisons increases, the chance of making this type of error also increases.

A Bonferroni adjustment was used to correct significance tests for multiple comparisons. This method adjusts the significance level for the total number of comparisons made with a particular classification variable. All the differences cited in this report are significant at the .05 level of significance after a Bonferroni adjustment.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their appreciation to the following reviewers of this report who provided valuable critique and suggestions: Marilyn McMillen of the Elementary and Secondary Education Statistics Division of NCES; Mike Cohen of the Statistical Standards and Methodology Division of NCES; John Ralph of the Data Development Division of NCES; Oliver Moles, OERI; Bruce Taylor, Bureau of Justice Statistics; and Edward D. Jonas, Jr., Atlanta Board of Education.

Endnotes

[1]Unpublished data, National Crime Victimization Survey, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of of Justice Statistics, 199.

[2]W. Mansfield, D. Alexander, and E. Farris, *Fast Response Survey System, Teacher Survey* on *Title, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools,* FRSS 42, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1991 (NCES 91–091).

[3]A total of 12,680 parents of students in grades 3 through 12 and 6,504 students in grades 6 through 12 were interviewed in the NHES:93.

[4]The survey data were weighted to the entire U.S. population of youth in grades 6 through 12 those youth living in households with telephones.

[5]The American Psychological Association, Violence and Youth: Psychologys Response Volume I: Summary Report of the American Psychological Association Commission on on Violence and Youth, 1993, p. 42.

[6]R.J. Hazier, J.H. Hoover, and R. Oliver, "What Kids Say About Bullying," *The Executive Educator,* November 1992, pp. 20–22.

[7]Elementary schools were defined as having a lowest grade of 3 or less and a highest grade of 8 or less. Middle or junior high school schools were defined as having a lowest arid a highest grade of 4 through 9. Senior high schools were defined as having a lowest grade of 7 through 12 and a highest grade 10 through 12. Schools that did not precisely meet these qualifications were classified as combined."

[8]For additional information on telephone coverage issues and (Estimation procedures to correct for coverage biases, see J.M. Brick and J. Burke, Telephone Coverage Bias of *14- to 21-year-olds air 3 to 5-year-olds.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1992 (NCES 92–101).

Table 1.— Percentage of students reporting the occurrence of, witness of, worry about, or victimization through robbery, bullying, or physical attack at school,[1] by school and family characteristics: 1993

Characteristic	Number of students in grades 6 through 12 (thousands)	Crime or threats at school							
		Has occurred		Has witnessed		Worried about		Happened to him or her	
		Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.
Total	24,060	71	2.0	56	2.2	25	1.2	12	0.7
School grade level[2]									
Elementary school	2,663	60	5.7	47	4.8	29	3.3	13	2.0
Middle or junior high school	7,418	77	3.0	60	2.5	34	1.8	17	1.1
Senior high school	11,539	71	1.1	58	1.3	20	0.8	8	0.6
Combined	2,440	60	7.2	45	5.6	19	2.9	11	1.7
School type[3]									
Public, assigned	19,507	73	1.8	58	2.0	26	1.1	12	0.8
Public, chosen	2,683	71	7.2	54	6.1	27	3.1	10	1.7
Private	1,870	45	2.9	32	2.3	13	1.6	7	1.1
School size[4]									
Under 300	2,632	58	5.8	44	4.2	21	3.3	10	1.8
300 - 599	7,820	68	3.3	53	4.5	27	2.2	13	1.3
600 - 999	6,176	74	1.3	59	1.4	25	1.2	12	0.9
1,000 or more	7,433	75	1.2	60	1.4	25	1.1	10	0.8
Student's race/ethnicity and school racial composition[5]									
White in mostly white school	9,598	70	1.9	54	2.9	22	1.4	10	0.9
White in racially mixed school	6,449	75	2.6	61	2.6	27	1.7	13	1.0
White in mostly nonwhite school	789	74	3.6	59	4.2	25	3.4	15	2.4
Black in mostly black school	1,055	70	3.4	56	3.3	27	3.0	10	1.8
Black in racially mixed school	1,958	68	7.3	55	6.3	29	3.5	11	2.4
Black in mostly nonblack school	814	69	4.2	56	4.5	22	3.8	14	3.0
Other race/ethnicity-school combination	3,399	64	6.5	48	4.8	26	4.9	12	3.2
Student's race/ethnicity									
White, non-Hispanic	16,835	72	2.0	57	2.6	24	1.3	12	0.7
Black, non-Hispanic	3,826	69	4.0	56	3.4	27	2.1	12	1.2
Hispanic	2,636	65	1.9	51	2.3	30	2.0	11	1.4
Other races	762	64	6.5	48	4.8	26	4.9	12	3.2
Sex									
Male	12,040	71	1.4	58	2.4	25	1.5	14	1.0
Female	12,020	70	3.0	54	2.3	26	1.3	9	0.7

[1]Includes school activities during the day and on the way to and from school.

[2]Schools were classified according to the lowest and highest grades at the school. Schools in which the lowest grade was 3 or less and the highest grade was 8 or less were classified as elementary. Middle or junior high schools were those that had a low grade of 4 through 9 and a high grade of 4 through 9. Senior high schools had a low grade of 7 through 12 and a high grade of 10 through 12. Schools that did not precisely meet these qualifications were classified as "combined."

[3]School type was defined by the parents of the students who were interviewed as an assigned public school, a public school that was chosen by the family, or a private school.

[4]School size was determined by the estimate of parents of students who were asked to choose from among the following four categories: under 300, 300 to 599, 600 to 999, or 1,000 or more. Parents who were only able to estimate the number of students in their child's grade were allowed to do so, and that answer was converted to size of school based upon the number of grades in the school.

[5]School racial composition was measured by parent reports. Schools were characterized as having more than 75 percent of students in the same racial/ethnic group as the child, between 25 and 75 percent, or less than 25 percent in the same racial/ethnic group.

NOTE: s.e. is standard error. Number of students may not add to totals due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1993.

Table 2.— Percentage of students reporting victimization at school,[1] by school and family characteristics: 1993

Characteristic	Number of students in grades 6 through 12 (thousands)	Type of incident					
		Bullying		Physical attack		Robbery	
		Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.
Total	24,060	8	0.5	4	0.4	1	0.2
School grade level[2]							
Elementary school	2,663	10	1.6	4	1.0	1	0.4
Middle or junior high school	7,418	12	0.8	5	0.7	2	0.3
Senior high school	11,539	6	0.5	3	0.4	1	0.2
Combined	2,440	9	1.4	3	0.9	1	0.4
School type[3]							
Public, assigned	19,507	9	0.5	4	0.4	1	0.2
Public, chosen	2,683	8	1.4	4	1.0	1	0.4
Private	1,870	5	1.1	1	0.5	*	0.3
School size[4]							
Under 300	2,632	7	1.4	4	1.0	*	0.2
300 - 599	7,820	10	1.0	4	0.6	1	0.3
600 - 999	6,176	8	0.8	3	0.6	1	0.3
1,000 or more	7,433	7	0.7	4	0.5	1	0.2
Student's race/ethnicity and school racial composition[5]							
White in mostly white school	9,598	8	0.7	3	0.5	1	0.1
White in racially mixed school	6,449	10	0.8	4	0.6	2	0.3
White in mostly nonwhite school	789	9	2.2	5	1.7	3	1.2
Black in mostly black school	1,055	8	1.7	3	1.1	1	0.4
Black in racially mixed school	1,958	6	1.5	5	1.7	1	0.6
Black in mostly nonblack school	814	9	2.7	5	2.0	2	1.1
Other race/ethnicity-school combination	3,399	7	1.0	4	0.8	2	0.5
Student's race/ethnicity							
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Black, non-Hispanic	3,826	7	0.9	5	1.0	1	0.4
Hispanic	2,636	6	0.8	4	0.9	2	0.5
Other races	762	9	2.7	3	1.5	1	0.6
Sex							
Male	12,040	10	0.7	5	0.6	1	0.2
Female	12,020	7	0.6	2	0.3	1	0.2

*Less than 0.5 percent.

[1]Includes school activities during the day and on the way to or from school.

[2]Schools were classified according to the lowest and highest grades at the school. Schools in which the lowest grade was 3 or less and the highest grade was 8 or less were classified as elementary. Middle or junior high schools were those that had a low grade of 4 through 9 and a high grade of 4 through 9. Senior high schools had a low grade of 7 through 12 and a high grade of 10 through 12. Schools that did not precisely meet these qualifications were classified as "combined."

[3]School type was defined by the parents of the students who were interviewed as an assigned public school, a public school that was chosen by the family, or a private school.

[4]School size was determined by the estimate of parents of students who were asked to choose from among the following four categories: under 300, 300 to 599, 600 to 999, or 1,000 or more. Parents who were only able to estimate the number of students in their child's grade were allowed to do so, and that answer was converted to size of school based upon the number of grades in the school.

[5]School racial composition was measured by parent reports. Schools were characterized as having more than 75 percent of students in the same racial/ethnic group as the child, between 25 and 75 percent, or less than 25 percent in the same racial/ethnic group.

NOTE: s.e. is standard error. Number of students may not add to totals due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1993.